4
Semantic Under-Determinacy and Conceptual Constraints

In this chapter, I will articulate and defend an account concerning the context-sensitivity of semantically under-determined sentences. The central thesis I will defend is that the context-sensitivity of semantically under-determined sentences such as ‘It’s raining’, ‘Jill is ready’, ‘The leaves are green’, ‘Steel isn’t strong enough’, ‘Bill cut the grass’ is to be accounted for in terms of conceptual constraints, that is constraints that govern concept use – and derivatively, language use.

Before presenting the account in greater detail, some argument needs to be offered to justify the position. Firstly, I will need to defend the claim that a characterisation of the context-sensitivity of semantically under-determined sentences should be primarily semantic rather than pragmatic, thus opposing Radical Contextualism (section 4.1). Secondly, I will stress that the conceptual constraints proposal strives to defend the idea that the context-sensitivity of semantically under-determined sentences has no syntactic articulation, thus going against Indexical Contextualism as it has been understood by its main proponents (section 4.2). Formulation and defence of the conceptual constraints view will be the subject of section 4.3, while in section 4.4 I will take up some issues concerning the relationship between the conceptual and lexical semantics I am presently defending and the question of meaning Molecularism as opposed to Atomism and Holism.

4.1 A preference for a semantic (rather than pragmatic) account

In this section, I will defend the insight that an account of the context-sensitivity of semantically under-determined sentences should be
primarily in semantic terms (if such an account is available), rather than in pragmatic terms.

That the context-sensitivity should be accounted for in semantic terms means that the contribution made by the context is guided or controlled by some standing, context-invariant semantic features of the expressions occurring in the sentence. This conception is modelled along the lines of indexicals and demonstratives, where a standing, context-invariant semantic trait of these expressions provides an instruction for reference assignment in context. For instance, it is the standing, context-invariant meaning of ‘I’, which could be spelled out as ‘the speaker in context’, that provides an instruction as to how context should contribute with reference.\(^1\) Also relational predicates offer a good model: consider a sentence like ‘Sam is an enemy’. The term ‘enemy’ seems to apply only to those individuals that are hostile to someone (certainly not to individuals that are hostile to no one). So it is part of the meaning itself of ‘enemy’ that whoever is indicated as such, is to be considered so relative to someone else. This relational aspect built into the term’s semantics will plausibly instruct the interpreter to search for some contextual information, so as to make the sentence fully evaluable.

After having laid down what I mean by ‘a semantic account’ of the context-sensitivity of a certain expression, what I wish to argue in this section is that, other things being equal, we should privilege an account of the context-sensitivity of semantically under-determined sentences in semantic rather than pragmatic terms, when this is available. Why so?

One major motivation is that the incompleteness of semantically under-determined sentences often concerns conceptual aspects which are clearly identifiable independently of pragmatic considerations. This strongly suggests that the semantic defectiveness of these sentences could be resolved by appealing to semantic resources plus some contextual information, rather than by appealing to pragmatic principles and maxims. For instance, the incompleteness exhibited by ‘Jill is ready’ typically depends on a failure to specify for what Jill is ready, a failure which seems to be due to disregarding some aspects linked to the way we think about being ready – being ready for this, for that and so on. We only need to be somehow cognisant that the predicate or concept BEING READY mandates retrieval of such an element in context, plus some contextual information, in order to provide the desired completion; what we do not need to do is go through pragmatic reasoning in order to figure out the implicit purpose or activity for which Jill is ready. Employing the resources supplied by the semantics of ‘ready’ or the